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AMERICANIZING THROUGH LOCAL HISTORY

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The values of studying the history of one's own community seem too obvious for much comment; but some of the books say that every article should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, and I find certain conscientious Freshmen inclined to worry more over the introduction and conclusion than the body of their themes. So—with this introduction to my Introduction—the topic statement will be as follows:

The primary object in drawing upon local color for work in high-school English is to develop in pupils the ability to express themselves about those things of life which are nearest to them in time, place, and interest. To quote from an article¹ by a Wellesley College instructor, "There are two ways of teaching. One is to sit behind a desk and pass out across its top and down to the patient ranks below, a certain content of information. . . . English composition demands another method, that method whereby several meet in the market-place and exchange ideas on the state of the crops, the beauty of the autumn foliage and the value or the pity of this and that and the other in the world"—meaning particularly, of course, the pupils' own world. If studying one's own village and school and the story of their beginning

¹ Helen B. Magee, "Inspiration in Freshman Composition," *English Journal*, VII, 313.

and development is no more vital to the students than the résumé of books they do not care for, or puzzling over some problem clear out of their ken, then other values are hardly worth considering. If it does give them live subject-matter and a genuine reason for composition, then (from the standpoint of the English teacher), such study is worth while, even though finer thrills are missed.

Unless the work is of a wholly trifling character, however, many pupils will gain a deepened sense of oneness with their community. A foundation will be laid "for that love of locality which is the essence of civic patriotism. . . . The child who has been made familiar with this local history will feel that the traditions and annals of his birthplace are a rich heritage that he shares in common with every man, woman, and child in his neighborhood. . . . He will have been taught to take a broader view of the position held by his home town in the state and in the nation; he will appreciate what it stands for and should stand for."^{*} Final comment on this greater aim is reserved for the conclusion.

Ideally, the study of local history should be worked out co-operatively by the history and English departments. The year's program for every school may not permit this. In my own beginning experiment, the work had to be done in the English department, and could not be so thorough as if it had been possible to correlate English assignments with history assignments. The following plan was worked out with the idea of correlating with both American history and civics, wherever possible.

Freshman composition begins most naturally with simple narration, so that the Freshman part would naturally have to do with the community of the present, and chiefly in relation to the children's personal interests and activities. The first motivation may easily be the teacher's own curiosity and interest, and discussions may be provoked by questions about favorite picnic grounds, the best hikes, the most interesting things to see in or near town, and what they consider the most interesting events of the year. Such questions as these may be asked: If a friend from out of town came to visit you, where would you take him? If you were writing a letter to a friend who had never been here,

* Hart, *Educational Resources of Village and Rural Communities*, chap. vi.

what would you tell him to interest him in your village or community? If you went to live in another town, what would you be interested in finding out about it? The narrative form may be set by the suggestion that they tell stories of actual incidents, the enjoyable, exciting, or amusing things that have happened at some picnic, at church socials, at Chautauqua, the circus, or the village stores. The sources of material will be, primarily, their own observation and experience; their personal reactions to their community.

In the second year, in many schools, a prescribed course in civics gives opportunity for more advanced study of the community. Explanations of the organization and administration of village affairs, descriptions of elections, the duties of officials, the things a newcomer would need to know in order to become a good citizen of the place—these are some of the topics available. Still better are assignments dealing with activities of the pupils themselves in making the community better and more attractive. In both the first- and second-year classes all the ordinary motives for composition will be used, but by limiting the subject-matter in this slight degree, the members of each group will find a common interest and basis for their work, which will make final unification possible.

The Junior year, in some ways, seems a good time for the study of the history of the school. That topic is large enough for separate treatment by a group, and students ought to be familiar, by the third year, with any traditions the school may have. In addition, if study of the school's growth succeeds in sharpening the pupils' interest, they have still more than a year in which to work for the betterment of school life and spirit. Most of the children will be in touch with grown people who have taught or attended the school, and who will be generous with reminiscences. Other former students or instructors may be reached through correspondence with the class. There are sometimes school records, or a county history may contain information about the development of the school system. Members of the Board of Education who have been in close touch with the school for a number of years may be willing to give talks to the class. Individual topics may

be taken. In trying the matter out, I found some who were bored by the general subject were considerably interested in finding at what point athletics had first been introduced; others had got hold of stories about the rearrangement and expansion of the building.

The Senior work in American history gives opportunity to correlate, directly or indirectly, the work of English and history. Assignments may be planned definitely to fit the work of both courses; or the history course may furnish background, while English composition in local history makes that background less remote. The first step in either case is a survey of sources, such as county or town histories, old records and files, family genealogies, and the traditions of old residents. Where grandparents' tales are the principal source, the result is bound to be less accurate, but may gain in lively interest; and if it is possible to arrange for one or two addresses to be made to the class as a whole, this adds impetus to personal investigation. Individuals may be made responsible for such topics as these: Indian occupation, early explorations, the first settlers, pioneer life, any great disasters of fire or flood, first public meetings and organizations, and the coming of railways, lighting, water, and industries. The part taken by the community in the Civil, Spanish American, and Great Wars, may interest certain pupils, the periods chosen by each being dependent upon individual interest and material available to various members of the group. Suggestive questions for local history are given in Hart's *Educational Resources of Village and Rural Communities*, chapter vi. In most communities, too, much material will be found upon which to base imaginative themes either in narration or drama, and this could be used after the particular project was finished. In my own small experiment, which was carried on chiefly in a class of twelve Senior girls, not all of whom were studying American history, we found ourselves handicapped by lack of material. Had we had more time (or had I been more foresighted) a number of books could have been borrowed from the State Library. As it was, there was only one county history to which two or three of the girls had access. Two very interesting old records told of explorations in the neighbor-

hood in 1769 and 1781, before any settlement was established, and the class had extracts copied from these old journals, upon which several of the themes were based. The early town records, however, had been destroyed, and so the girls were thrown largely upon their own initiative in collecting material. This was so miscellaneous that the first themes were unorganized, though interesting and informational. These first themes were put into a class notebook, and from them, supplemented with further material which they suggested a way of getting, each student worked out a single topic theme. Two took the subject of early Indian occupation and hardships of early settlers, for some of our best material was on these topics. One took the development of communication, and one the development of industries. One took the religious history of the town, another the part of the town in the Great War, and another a description of the physical surroundings of the village. There was a theme on the political history and one upon the general history, covering a period about which we could find little definite information. Two Junior themes on the history of the school were combined and added. The girls enjoyed the study, and were delighted when the result was sent to the State Director of History and brought unexpected and generous commendation from him and from the State Commissioner of Education, along with suggestions that would be of value to another class in following up the subject. For, since "a man's reach must exceed his grasp," the actual experiment could not be so complete as the outline given in this paper, as the project had been planned before. There is nothing disappointing, however, in finding that any project is rich enough to last more than one year, and the further suggestions made are simply to show how full the subject is of good material which may be adapted in one way to one school and another way to fit the needs of another locality.

If all of the classes are using local color as subjects for study and composition, as suggested in the outline sketched, the results of the study of each class should be gathered together before too long, and put into some form available for both pupils and visitors to see. At the least, the contributions can be organized in a

loose-leaf notebook, and made permanent enough for bequeathal to future classes. The more of the work of assembling that can be done by the students themselves, the better. Each class may have an editing committee, and the chairmen of these committees form a central board of editors, with the Senior chairmen as editor-in-chief. If the school is one where the "annual" has become something of a problem to support financially, a "community book" may gain the more active support of people outside of the school, and serve also to bring the school's interests into the right proportion with community interests, in the eyes of egocentric youngsters, giving them a sense of the broader value and appeal of their production. Besides these possibilities of publication, at least some of the essays can probably be published in a local paper.

There are still other ways in which local-color material may be used. In the case of a union school, children from various parts of the township can bring in special work on their own neighborhood, and the scope of the investigation be determined by the number of neighborhoods represented. A brief essay on "Local History" in *Scribner's*¹ suggests that a start be made with one's own house as a nucleus, and that the investigator work back and circle out from that center. This method might interest some pupil, or the idea might be adopted by a group taking the oldest house as a starting-point. Another suggestion is that pupils imagine themselves members of an early scouting party, and keep diaries of their adventure.

Dramatization of local historical events has already been suggested. There may be material for tableaux or pageants. One school found that a model of a pioneer settlement made by the children was one of the most interesting features at a civic exhibition.² Snapshots, sketches, maps or graphs, and postcards will always add interest. For the phase of the work which deals with the growth of the school, a spelling bee in old-fashioned costume might entertain both elders and children, and add zest to the business of mastering Mr. Ward's minimum. But which of these

¹ XLVIII, 250-51.

² *Historical Outlook*, June, 1919 (A Graphic Civics Exhibit).

ideas would be useful must be determined by the equipment, needs and desires of the school itself.

To requote from the local history chapter in Mr. Hart's book, the pupil, by such a study of his community, "will have been taught to take a broader view of the position held by his home town in the state and in the nation; he will appreciate what it stands for and should stand for." This expresses, I think, the deepest aim. (We are now on the Conclusion.) In a recent address which Doctor Finley made to the teachers of New York State, he said, "New York is often called provincial, but what it lacks is the correlating of all its far interests in a common civic purpose; it needs a provincial or a *perivincial* (a near-conquering) consciousness." This consciousness ought not to make a pupil provincial in the wrong sense, but should be the truest basis for broadening. *The Literary Digest*,¹ in a review entitled "To Avert a National Crisis by New-Englandism," quotes Mr. John Cotton Dana as follows: "If we can as a nation transform our society to fit the new temper, we may, as did our New England fathers, hold fast to the old in us that is good and let none of the humanism of the new spirit the war has brought be exhausted in violence." Any section of the country may "summon up for emulation the best that they, whether of the South, the West, or the Middle West, have contributed to the nation's ideals," to "find out what good it has done and by the exercise of what qualities of heart and mind it has done that good; and to try to make more active here and now those same qualities." Nor need such study, unless wilfully planned to obtain the wrong reactions, be provincial in time any more than place. As in the best study of history, acquaintance with the past life of the locality should lead to better understanding of the present, and should not encourage stagnation, but serve as a ballast in making intelligent and sane progress.

¹ *Literary Digest*, July 26, 1919.